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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews and discusses political models that bear on policy-making processes. The first part of the report deals with the merits of the "elitist" versus the "pluralistic" frameworks used to analyze the exercise of power in local communities. This review of the theories serves as a basis for a subsequent discussion of "nondecision" as an analytic tool for comprehending the nature and uses of power. Practical minority community strategems designed to enhance political influence over local educational policies are then outlined. Based on unobstrusive data, the strategems discussed provide a conceptual framework for policy research in education while the qualitative methodology offers a research roadmap. (Author/AM)

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THE POLITICS OF POLICY-MAKING:

MINORITY STRATEGEMS*

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THE POLITICS OF POLICY-MAKING: MINORITY STRATEGEMS

by

Frederick D. Volp*

Social scientists have long been conducting research to better understand the extent to which historically disenfranchized minority interests have exerted emergent political "clout" to influence policy-making processes in local school systems. Such research has often centered on the policy issues of desegregation, community control, decentralization, and the cultural orientations of the school curriculum. These issues gave rise to complex battles that have been staged, more often than not, in the crucible of large, urban school districts.

This paper has three purposes. First, political models that bear on policy-making processes will be reviewed and discussed. Second, minority community strategems designed to enhance political influence over local educational policies will be outlined. Third, the utility of field study methodology for educational policy research will be assessed.

Politics and Policy-Making: Analytical Models

Political scientists have debated, sometimes heatedly, over two decades, the merits of the "elitist" versus "pluralist" frameworks

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for analyzing the exercise of power in local communities. Floyd Hunter's benchmark work Community Power Structure (1953) relied on "reputational" methods as the means for describing the structure of influence in Atlanta. Equally important political questions were analyzed by C. Wright Mills, a contemporary of Hunter's, in his book The Power Elite (1957). Robert Dahl employed "issue analysis" methodology in tracing the patterns of governance in New Haven. Who Governs? (1961) surely ranks as the centerpiece of the "pluralist" school. The "elitist" and pluralist models for understanding the exercise of community power deserve a brief review. Such a review is important in order to grasp the conceptual utility of more recent research by Bachrach and Baratz into "nondecisions" as an analytic tool to comprehend the nature and uses of power.

Hunter's use of sociometric techniques led him to the conclusion that a man's standing in the business community was the primary test for admission to a behind-the-scenes decision-making clique of powerful men in Atlanta. These men interacted socially and this led to their inclusion in important, yet informal, policy-making groups. The so-called power elite of businessmen dominated civic leaders and politicians. "The men in the understructure of power became the doers and were activated by the policy-makers--the initiators."[1] The standard criticism of Hunter's use of the "reputational" method of identifying the "elite" was that it presupposes that a group of top leaders exists. Space precludes an exhaustive recounting of dissension; but Polsby, a charter member of the pluralist school, best pinpoints the flaws of

the reputational methodology in Community Power and Political Theory (1963). Critics note that even if a power elite operates to control policy outcomes, they simply do not determine all decisions.

Walton, in a revisionist interpretation of Hunter's work, cites several often overlooked features of Community Power Structure. First, Hunter's research prompted a prodigious number of subsequent studies which relied heavily on his "systematic, multi-stage method for tracing the structure of influence."[2] Second, Hunter's detractors frequently have been blind to his attempts to delineate who influenced what in separate and distinct policy arenas. Third, as Walton so lucidly explains:

> While it has only recently occurred to researchers that cities, local communities, and the sub-communities they embody must be understood in the context of their vertical ties or linkages to institutions of the larger society; the Atlanta study took this as axiomatic and traversed at least three levels of systemic power.[3]

In this regard, Hunter, unlike many of his contemporaries, concentrated specifically on the black sub-community and concluded that black leaders had access only to the second echelon of the white power structure. His analysis of change in the black community predated extensive activity by Martin Luther King. Other signs that the black community was increasingly organized were evident. It was also apparent that politicians were listening more carefully to black demands, for the usual practices of suppression and force were having less impact. Hunter prophesized:

> In this instance policy formerly settled is being challenged by a group which is organized to the point where its voice must be heard, and the older methods of intimidation and coercion against this

> group are no longer effective. Many of the Negro leaders are relatively secure financially, and their own positions of leadership are threatened within their community if they remain subservient to the dominant group.[4]

Thus, Hunter forecast the 1960's struggles over leadership within the black community itself.

Where Hunter, by his own admission, failed, was in not constructing a theory of community power. C. Wright Mills did add conceptual dimensions to the notion of a power elite, but the pluralists--Dahl, Polsby, and in education, Ralph Kimbrough--provided theoretical underpinnings for community power research.

Robert Dahl argues that the fundamental axiom in the theory and practice of American pluralism is this: "Instead of a single center of sovereign power there must be multiple centers of power, none of which is or can be wholly sovereign."[5] In a pluralist political system, power is dispersed unequally among competing interest groups. It can be predicted that on any given policy issue certain groups will participate while others with potential influence will opt to disengage their resources. Interest groups, thus, choose their arenas selectively.

> The pluralist model assumes there is no absolute 'public interest,' since the interests of various actors and groups in the system are diverse and frequently in conflict. Policy decisions cannot therefore possibly satisfy the needs and desires of all interest groups simultaneously.[6]

In the pluralist approach, specific outcomes are investigated so as to assess which actor or sets of actors prevail in community decision-making. "Issue analysis" for pluralist researchers focuses

on more than one issue-area, for it is assumed that the mold of decision-making for one issue is not likely to be replicated in another issue-area. Field study has been typically used as the methodological tool for pluralist researchers.

> Since actual behavior is observed or reconstructed from documents, witnesses, and so on, it is possible to determine empirically whether or not the same group rules in two or more issue-areas. The presumption that a power elite is unlikely does not, in other words, prevent finding one.[7]

The pluralists reject the notion of attempting to define an actor's ranking in a political system presumed to operate hierarchically. Rather, "pluralists want to find out about leadership roles, which are presumed to be diverse and fluid, both within a single-issue-area over time and between issue areas."[8] Thus, in community decision-making, Polsby notes that leadership roles change depending on the degree of overlap of decision-making personnel among issue-areas, the degree of institutionalization in the bases of power, and the degree of regularity in the procedures of decision-making.

Dahl provides an addendum to the basic tenets of pluralist theory as outlined above. Since one center of power is cast against another, the end result is that power may be controlled, tamed, and limited to humane purposes. Similarly, the most severe use of power, coercion and force, may be reduced to a minimum. Furthermore, because policy decisions are made only after prolonged negotiations between groups, political actors will strive to settle their conflicts peacefully and to achieve consensus.[9]

On all counts Dahl may be overly optimistic. Securing the consent of all parties and settling disputes peacefully are admirable goals. His pluralist utopianism, however, may well overlook a specific racial factor. That is, there can be little question that racial minorities have gained access to decision-making apparatus in the pluralist context. Nevertheless, in the 1960's, the relative inexperience of minorities in affecting and manipulating established power centers led to frustration and to leadership quarrels. Under such conditions, minority groups frequently abandoned the so-called "existent norms" of pluralist participation to make demands in the form of moral imperatives. Such a tactic has been referred to as "status politics" or an attempt by status groups in a society to influence political and social institutions for the purpose of enhancing or defending their social position in relation to other groups. Injecting moral considerations and status claims in a pluralist arena were legitimate and sometimes successful, but also there were, and are, occasions where such tactics clearly prevent a peaceful resolution of a conflict. Witness, for example, the community control forces who challenged, with mixed success, the United Federation of Teachers' leadership in New York City in 1968. Decisions were made to establish community dominated "demonstration schools," but because the social status of the community leadership was impugned by the teachers' union, residual hostility and anger festered on both sides. With this criticism of pluralism in mind, it remains to examine a recent conceptual addition to the pluralist model.

Bachrach and Baratz, in two articles published in the 1960's and in a book-length essay in 1970, create sound arguments for the use of the concept of "nondecision making" in exploring the character of community power. Although critiqued strenuously by Debnam in The American Political Science Review in 1975, Bachrach and Baratz respond by clarifying just what is meant by nondecisions.

Building on the pluralists' groundwork, Bachrach and Baratz maintain that over time inequality in a political system is sustained by the "mobilization of bias," or the existent norms, precedents, myths, rituals, institutions, and procedures that operate in favor of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others.[10] Put another way, they claim that institutions and procedures, which may appear neutral to those seeking or resisting change, actually dictate the nature and extent of conflict. Furthermore they argue:

> The use of power and its correlates is a crucial means for sustaining and strengthening the mobilization of bias and thereby perpetuating 'unfair shares' in the allocation of benefits and privileges. The exercise of power towards this end is a major form of nondecision making, defined as a process for thwarting latent or manifest challenges to things-as-they-are.[11]

They proceed to delineate overt and covert forms of nondecision making. By addressing the predominant norms, precedents, myths, institutions and procedures of a pluralist power structure, the nondecision making model presumes that upholders of status quo, by exercising their power resources, shape political consensus and operate to prevent challenges to their values and interests. Thus, Bachrach and Baratz also take issue with Dahl's contention that peaceful consensus is heightened in

pluralist settings. They envision barriers to entry even in pluralist polities. Their approach extends the definition of "political interest" so that "it includes overt and covert grievances, as well as challenges to things as they are that have actually become issues."[12]

Bachrach and Baratz are quick to note that empiricists are uneasy with this concept since it does not neatly lend itself to systematic investigation. They do, nevertheless, throw down the gauntlet by urging the empiricists to devise appropriate techniques to test the validity of nondecision making, for their primary contribution, and this writer concurs, lies in the theoretical significance of the nondecision making idea. Bachrach and Baratz could be expected to subscribe to Frankel's view.

> In fact cohesion is achieved in democratic societies precisely because certain questions, the most important questions, are kept out of the arena in which agreement is expected or required. This is the condition for democratic stability as well as for democratic freedom.[13]

The goddess Janus had two faces. Decisions and nondecisions are the two faces of power. The next section highlights minority strategems for influencing decisions and nondecisions in educational policy making.

Minority Strategems for Influencing Local Educational Policy

The emergence of a broader middle class minority base, the development of a cadre of leadership in a range of professional positions, including education, and the political experience logged as a result of the civil rights movement in the 1950's and 1960's have

fundamentally altered the prospect for galvanizing community efforts to effect educational policy making in local school systems. This is not to say that low income minorities, both black and white, deserve "benign neglect." Rather, it simply means that more widely distributed resources exist to be tapped by minority communities anxious to improve the responsiveness of school district policies to their special needs.

If organizational policies are derived through "the management of conflict among a host of political solutions," then policies are political decisions.[14] Educational policy has been defined as "the allocation of resources within an educational organization or within organizations that have a very direct and identifiable effect on educational institutions."[15] Obviously superintendents, school boards, other district administrators, teachers' union representatives, state authorities, business and civil organizations as well as community interests, have a stake in the outcomes of educational policy decisions. Community strategems are outlined herein. Strategems, or tactical schemes, are diverse and are employed judiciously depending on the policy domain in question. It goes without saying that strategems directed towards influencing desegregation plans for an urban school district will most likely be different from strategems used to increase the number of minority administrators in a school system.

Phillips reports a series of strategems applied with fluctuating measures of success in Newark. Litigation designed to force change is perhaps the most obvious tactic. This means, however, suffers due to the time and costs involved and a "despair of equity and relief

from a legal system inherently predisposed toward the maintenance of social order and systemic equilibrium."[16] For example, the Supreme Court's recent decision to review the Dayton desegregation case has been interpreted by some to mean that the Supreme Court was telling opponents of desegregation to keep appealing desegregation orders because "there is always the hope that someone will try to change the law."[17] Nevertheless, litigation continues to constitute a legitimate avenue for minority initiated reform of local school policy.

Urban school boards have been the targets of much criticism. Public school board meeting "nondecisions" are frequently taken up in more private, less publicized board "study sessions." Rules governing which policy questions appear on public board meeting agendas are devised and revised. Naturally, this phenomenon has important implications for the structure of debate in public forums as well as the subsequent dialogue in the so-called "study sessions." Community leaders are well advised to note these patterns of governance. Although there is a need to maintain a "presence" in public board meetings so as to articulate policy stances, there may be even more mileage in assuring minority representation and input in the school board study sessions.

Barbara Sizemore, former superintendent of the Washington D. C. City Schools, has written perceptively on efforts to counter white domination on the school board in the early 1970's.[18] Concerted efforts to lobby with elected minority politicians broadened the support for change in the D. C. City Schools, and the pattern of meeting first with elected city officials and then mobilizing the community to vote

for minority school board cardidates also proved successful in Newark. Alliances between community organizations, school officials and elected politicians is another proven strategem for influencing district policies, but the old-line argument which tries to separate education and politics continues to be voiced by entrenched educators when opposition to things-as-they-are develops.

The proliferation of community-based service organizations complicates attempts by friends of education interests to activate allied resources in support of a proposed desegregation, decentralization, or community control plan for urban schools. For instance, in Syracuse, New York, community service groups include the Urban League, whose leadership prompted litigation aimed at ensuring racially balanced schools; the People's Equal Action Community Effort (PEACE); the Church Council; the Model Cities Office; the Coalition for Quality Education; the Committee for Independent Parent Organizations; the NAACP; the Reorganizing and Integrating for Superior Education group (RISE); and the Syracuse Citizens Rebelling Against Mandatory Busing (SCRAM). The galaxy of groups in urban areas confuses the prospects for mobilization on a specific educational policy issue, and, if the past is any guide, mobilization attempts have resulted in leadership struggles within and between organizations. Thus, friends of education strategies which are directed towards harmonizing the resources of these groups require not only the ability to crystallize the policy matter in question but also the knowledge of which groups to approach and when.

The use of the media--television, radio and newspapers--is still another strategem for clarifying and potentially influencing educational policy decisions. Regularly scheduled television news programs and local talk shows have provided time to air dissenting opinions on educational matters of local significance. Talk shows, in particular, may serve as a forum to pinpoint what was previously described as "nondecisions" emanating from the school district central office and from school board meetings. If local broadcasting companies permit the debate of policies by community leaders, then they represent another means of alerting the larger polity to questions that once could be highlighted only by media coverage of street protests and marches. Widespread protest demonstrations still attract television cameras and print journalists, but the suspicion here is that the public is likely to dismiss these events. For citizens appear to have grown tired and skeptical of scenes depicting teachers on the picket line, and viewers draw improper associations based on images. Distortions of this sort are common in the electronic media when the nightly news attempts to make a two-minute visual report of a complex issue.

Selected strategems intended to enhance community impact on educational decisions have been suggested. It is not an exhaustive list of possibilities. Altschuler offers important advice for those interested in furthering community control of policy making. He maintains that:

a. Community control should be conceived as a continuum rather than an absolute.

b. Its degree will inevitably vary from one field of activity to the next.

c. Its degree may also vary from one dimension of any given policy arena to the next.[19]

Expertise and control of information are the overriding resources necessary for community leaders to implement any or all of the strategems discussed. Just as the superintendent of schools' primary power resource is the reputation for expertise in educational affairs, so must minority leaders continue to develop expertise on educational policy questions, for as Jimmy Breslin has noted, "the reputation of power is power."

The next section examines the use of qualitative field methods as a research tool for assessing minority strategems and policy-making in local school systems.

The Use of Qualitative Field Research

The perpetual controversy between quantitative and qualitative researchers typically has centered on which camp best produces "real" research. Such contentiousness has intruded on rational discussions about the proper role and function of quantitative and qualitative techniques. Iannaccone boldly states that "the conflict tends to ignore the researchers' goals and purposes, emphasizing data collection at the expense of problem definition, which I believe to be the chief function of basic research."[20] The design here is not to debase quantitative

research, for quantitative methods clearly have a place in educational research. Instead, qualitative methods will be stressed in light of their power to explain the politics of policy-making in school systems.

If decisions and nondecisions relating to educational policy are worthy of investigation as previously argued, and if minority strategems directed towards affecting decisions and nondecisions are operationalized, then the collection of qualitative data may go far in confirming or denying not only aspects of the conceptual political models discussed earlier but also in helping to understand why certain strategems are successful or unsuccessful in determining policies.[21]

Cohen and Garet write in the Harvard Educational Review:

> . . . marginal programs, faulty assumptions and multiple program aims often mean that research on the effects of social interventions fails to provide clear and consistent evidence. This does not mean that research is bad or useless. Nor does it mean that research does not influence policy. But it certainly means that research does not affect policy by giving managers more authoritative information about particular decisions.[22]

The authors suggest that one of the reasons for the gap between expectations for applied research and the results of applied research is that the actual questions thought to require scientific analysis change in unanticipated ways in the course of research. Furthermore, they point out that in education research evidence is only rarely politically authoritative.

Another difficulty with policy analysis stems from the fact that researchers frequently evaluate the success or failure of the implementation of a policy. The fallacy here lies in the investigator's

concentration on policy programs after the organization has already committed resources to them instead of focusing on the validity of the organizational decision itself. Possible policy directions should be systematically analyzed by the researcher in advance of formal institutional decisions or nondecisions. Wergin states: "The most effective way an evaluator may incorporate the politics of evaluation, and thus perform this function more usefully, is by isolating probable future consequences, not by validating past events."[23] Similarly, Cohen and Garet declare: "The function of policy research is at least as much to describe and discuss the premises and objectives of policy as it is to predict policy effects. In this sense, applied research resembles a discourse about social reality--a debate about social problems and their solutions."[24]

The work of Lutz and Iannaccone, Understanding Educational Organizations: A Field Study Approach, remains a formidable source text for qualitative researchers. Their chapters which discuss the exercise of power in schools and the methods of studying power have been widely cited, for they do take into account the unique policy making features of public schools.[25]

Bogdan and Taylor have recently published an important and thorough text entitled an Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods (1975). The authors provide an indispensible roadmap, in the Michelin sense, for those dedicated to the comprehension and the use of qualitative research methods.

In their "phenomenological approach" to the social sciences, Bogdan and Taylor review two major theoretical perspectives borne out

of sociological research. Symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology are compatible with phenomenology, or concern with "understanding human behavior from the author's own frame of reference." They maintain that from the symbolic interactionist viewpoint, "all social organizations consist of actors who develop definitions of a situation, or perspectives, through the process of interpretation and who then act in terms of these definitions."[26] For ethnomethodologists:

> . . . the meanings of actions are always ambiguous and problematic for people in specific situations. Their task is to examine the ways people apply abstract rules and common sense understandings in situations in order to make actions appear routine, explicable, and unambiguous. Meanings, then, are practical accomplishments in the part of members of a society.[27]

These theoretical perspectives govern the conduct and interpretation of qualitative research. Data may be secured through the proven tools of participant observation and personal documents, including unstructured interviewing. The text devotes ample space to the data collection, interpretation, and presentation phases of qualitative research. Finally, a series of papers drawn from data obtained through qualitative methods are included as rich models.

In applying quantitative methods to educational policy research the Cohen and Garet claim that questions change in the course of research may be accounted for, since qualitative researchers permit the specifics of their approach to emerge as they proceed. Moreover, questions are typically posed in general terms so as to allow maximum flexibility in redefining, reshaping, and refocusing efforts stemming from the acquisition of field-based data.

It goes almost without saying that qualitative methods are more likely to tap the covert face of power as evidenced by policy makers' nondecisions. By soliciting the visible actors' definitions of a policy question and by matching these interpretations with those of identifiable minority actors, ambiguities in policy decisions may be explained if not overcome. Furthermore, the Bachrach and Baratz notion of the "mobilization of bias" may be qualitatively analyzed to show an elite corps of power-brokers operating in accordance with pluralist norms but, nevertheless, maintaining a monopoly of authoritative answers to policy questions. Longitudinal, field based, qualitative research in a metropolitan educational system may help to support or dismantle this speculative pattern or other possible configurations when applied to isolated and separated educational policy issues.

One final comment seems warranted. The distribution of analytic resources for research is an increasingly prominent problem. Cohen and Garet argue:

> Not to consider inequalities in access to research would be to acquiesce in the existing arrangement, which gives government a preponderant advantage in the legitimization of policy through science. To correct this imbalance, government agencies could give grants for policy research to organizations representing relatively powerless elements in the society; or independent research advocacy organizations might be established on the model of local Legal Services offices; or competing views on policy questions might be represented by giving contracts to established research organizations to undertake studies based on multiple approaches.[28]

Multiple approaches to the politics of policy making have been explored in terms of conceptual political models, practical minority strategems, and qualitative research methods. Frameworks exist for meaningful policy research that may aid educational managers in rendering rational decisions. A new generation of qualitative research may be imminent.

Notes

1. Floyd Hunter, Community Power Structure (Chapel Hill, N. C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), p. 100.

2. John Walton, "Community Power and the Retreat from Politics: Full Circle After Twenty Years?" Social Problems, XXIII (February 1976), 292-303.

3. Ibid., p. 294.

4. Hunter, op. cit., p. 217.

5. Robert A. Dahl, Pluralist Democracy in the United States: Conflict and Consent (Chicago: Rand-McNally and Company, 1967), p. 24.

6. Harland Bloland, Richard Lonsdale and Frank W. Lutz, "Educational Polities in New York City" (unpublished manuscript), p. 17.

7. Nelson W. Polsby, Community Power and Political Theory (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 114.

8. Ibid., p. 118.

9. See Dahl's elaborate discussion of these points in Pluralist Democracy in the United States.

10. Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, "Decisions and Nondecisions: An Analytical Framework," American Political Science Review, LVII (September 1963), 632-42.

11. Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, "Power and Its Two Faces Revisited: A Reply to Geoffrey Debnam," American Political Science Review, LXIX (September 1975), 900-04.

12. Ibid., p. 901.

13. Charles Frankel, The Democratic Prospect (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962), p. 28.

14. See Jon F. Wergin, "The Evaluation of Organizational Policy-Making: A Political Model," Review of Educational Research, XLVI (Winter 1976), 75-115.

15. Dennis W. Spuck, Lawrence J. Hubert and Henry S. Lufler, Jr., "An Introduction to Educational Policy Research," Education and Urban Society, VII (May 1975), 211-19.

16. W. M. Phillips, Jr. , "Educational Policy, Community Participation, and Race," Journal of Negro Education, XLIV (Summer 1975), 257-67.

17. See Lesley Oelsner Column, "School Desegregation: Where Does It All Stand?" in The New York Times, Section 4, January 23, 1977, p. 4.

18. Barbara A. Sizemore, "Education: Is Accommodation Enough?" Journal of Negro Education, XLIV (Summer 1975), 233-46.

19. Alan A. Altschuler, Community Control: The Black Demand for Participation in Large American Cities (New York: Pegasus, A Division of the Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1970), p. 44.

20. Laurence Iannoccone, "The Field Study in Educational Policy Research," Education and Urban Society, VII, No. 3 (May 1975), 220-38.

21. An excellent volume which addresses school district policies and community power has been written by Dale Mann, The Politics of Administrative Representation (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company, 1976) is based on qualitative field research.

22. David K. Cohen and Michael S. Garet, "Reforming Educational Policy with Applied Social Research," Harvard Educational Review, XLV, No. 1 (February 1975), 17-43.

23. Wergin, op. cit., p. 77.

24. Cohen and Garet, op. cit., p. 42.

25. See Frank W. Lutz and Laurence Iannaccone, Understanding Educational Organizations: A Field Study Approach (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1969). Note especially chapters 2, 3, and 4.

26. Robert Bogdan and Steven J. Taylor, Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Phenomenological Approach to the Social Sciences (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975), p. 15.

27. Ibid., p. 16.

28. Cohen and Garet, op. cit., pp. 41-42.